

February 3, 2009

## Site of Davis' final speech resurrected

GULFPORT — In March 1888, 79-year-old Jefferson Davis took a carriage ride from his Beauvoir home to the courthouse in Mississippi City, where he pleaded for unity and urged the South's young men to set aside their ill will to become part of the inevitable glory of the United States.

On Wednesday, nearly 120 years and 11 months to the day of Davis' final speech, the City of Gulfport will celebrate the recreation of this historic courthouse on Courthouse Road.

The first brick building in the resort community of Mississippi City, the courthouse was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. But like Grass Lawn before it, the Warr administration in its on-going effort to recapture every bit of the city's extraordinary history plans to rebuild the old courthouse.

"My administration made a commitment back in August of 2005 to do whatever we could to reclaim those important pieces of heritage that were swept away," Mayor Brent Warr said. "If we fail to resurrect those visible reminders of our past, then we permanently cut the ties to who we are as a people and where we have come from."

Funding for the \$1.2 million structure comes from nearly \$1 million in grants from FEMA, and more than \$200,000 of insurance money.

Mississippi City served as the seat of Harrison County from 1841 to 1902. The 5,900-square-foot building is being constructed by C. Perry Builders.

Like some of the most popular historic structures on the planet today, the courthouse will be a recreation. The only obvious difference will be that the replicated building faces Courthouse Road, rather than the railroad tracks.

"As a history instructor who teaches at a college bearing the name of Jefferson Davis, I'm pleased to see this facility resurrected from the ashes," Councilman Brian Carriere said. "It will stand, again, as a symbol for the Mississippi City community that has struggled to revive since Hurricane Katrina. Hopefully this will provide the catalyst."

<b>WHO:</b> Mayor Brent Warr, City Council members, representatives from C. Perry Builders, Williams and Associates, and FEMA
<b>WHAT:</b> Courthouse groundbreaking ceremony.
<b>WHEN:</b> Wednesday, Feb. 4, at 9 a.m.

**WHERE:** On the historic property of Jefferson Davis' final speech, at 713 Courthouse Road.

**Historical facts about the Courthouse, the town and Davis' speech:**

- Mississippi City was the first Coast town to receive a charter, but financial woes and politics eventually deprived the community of its cityhood.
- By the early 1890s, the courthouse was actually three buildings sandwiched between Courthouse Road and Texas Street.
- According to historic archives, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mississippi City was an exciting place. There were courtroom gunfights, political debates, saloon brawls and mule races.
- In 1987, the buildings future was uncertain, but to save the historic Courthouse, former Mayor Leroy Urie worked out a last-minute land swap with the American Legion.
- The building was the last remaining structure in a complex that served as the county seat of Harrison County.
- Jefferson Davis had been stripped of his citizenship long before his Mississippi City speech, and he seemed to have forgotten that fact when he began his address, "Friends and fellow citizens."
- But he quickly corrected himself: "Ah, pardon me, the laws of the United States no longer permit me to designate you as fellow citizens, but I am thankful that I may address you as friends." He died 21 months later.
- It wasn't until 90 years after the Mississippi City speech that a special congressional act restored Jefferson Davis' citizenship.

—*The Sun/Daily Herald archives*

**Other historic replicas:**

- The building at Appomattox where Robert E. Lee signed the surrender that ended the Civil War is a replica.
- Many of the buildings at Williamsburg are recreations of what was originally there during the Colonial period.
- The historic St. Mark's Square in Italy was recreated after the bell tower collapse and damaged and destroyed most of the buildings.
- A large part of the Alamo where Davey Crockett was killed has been reconstructed over the years.

— *Ken P'Pool, state's historical preservation officer with the Mississippi Department of Archives & History*